



Again, you're breathing (We'll get through this together) by LiaGwriter

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Summary: "How was it fair that she'd been given that - a home, a family - for a brief moment, only to have it ripped away completely?" With Mike's help, El learns to cope with the grief of Hop's disappearance.

Again, you're breathing (We'll get through this together)

For the first week, El could only really breathe when she was with Mike.

Being next to him, their hands intertwined; the reassuring weight of his presence in every room; his voice over the Supercomm, lulling her into some semblance of sleep.

He was the first to get to her when she found out, right after she saw Joyce's face and knew — with that awful, sick feeling in her chest — that Hopper wasn't coming out of the mall. Mike had caught her as she stumbled backward, held her as she sobbed. There were no words then. There couldn't be.

She could breathe when she was with him, because she could tell him things she couldn't tell anyone else. They could talk without words, sit in a silence that was never empty or uncomfortable.

She could breathe because it was *Mike*. He was her world, even when that world was fractured — even when she was unsure if it would ever be whole again.

In the days after, he almost never left her side, his bike taking up near-permanent residence on the Byers' porch. It was symbolic of how much he went back and forth from there to his house, always staying as long as he could, always asking El if she was sure it was okay for him to go, to shower or eat a meal with his family. She always said yes, even though when he left she felt a cold darkness creep in, winding itself painfully in her chest. But she kept it at bay, like holding her breath underwater, until she saw his face again and came to the surface.

When a month had gone by, something shifted. El felt the hazy fog of sadness and confusion begin to lift, and what came instead was anger, flooding in with a force that scared her. It manifested in a constant restlessness, every hour imbued with frustration, every usual routine devoid of comfort. She knew those around her noticed — it

was hard not to. She was irritable, her usual short replies coming out with a sharpe tinge that was unlike her. The only person who had the courage to say anything about it was Mike.

He tried one day as he biked her back to the Byers' house after the Party had hung out in his basement all afternoon, half-heartedly attempting to get some board games going. El had been quiet and surly the whole time, aware that she was dampening the mood but unable to push the sour, persistent thoughts from her mind: *This is so stupid. What's the point? Why does any of this matter anymore?*

Her internal monologue had been like that for most days recently, one refrain echoing the loudest: *It's not fair*. Logically, she knew the world didn't operate according to fairness — she'd seen and lived through enough evil already to know that was true. But as she watched her friends continue on, able to go home to their own families, however broken, the idea plagued her. How was it fair that they got a real home in the first place, and she never did? How was it *possibly* fair that she'd been given that for a brief moment, only to have it ripped away completely?

El shifted on the bike seat, trying to stay balanced with as little contact as possible. Being close to Mike had begun to hurt — another strange feature of the past few weeks. It was as though his gentle touch had become a reminder of everything she didn't have, of everything that had been taken from her.

"El, um," he began, and she cringed, knowing that her distant mood was the cause of his hesitation. "Are you okay? I know I've asked that a million times, but I just - "

"You have."

She felt him flinch, surprised at her quick reply.

"I've what?"

"Asked that a million times," El said, feeling the steady thrum of anger within her flare up.

"I - I know I have, but I don't know what else... I just thought today

you seemed, I don't know, worse than -"

"Worse? What's that supposed to mean?" El snapped back.

She tried to temper her voice, knowing he didn't really deserve it. But this was the unbridled part of the anger, the part that scared her — the way it made it difficult to be around those she loved most. Even more so, it seemed, when they wanted to help or comfort her.

Mike sighed and El knew his mind was whirring, thinking of a way to correct himself. "Not *worse*, I didn't mean it like that, I just meant that you kind of... I don't know, you were so quiet at my house, and I know you said you were tired, but you weren't laughing at Dustin's jokes or anything, and when Max -"

"Stop," El said, cutting him off. Her hands, set on the sides of his jacket, clenched into fists. "Just stop, Mike."

A moment later the bike's brakes screeched, its tires skidding against the dirt as he brought it to a halt. He turned to face her and she groaned, rolling her eyes. "I didn't mean stop the *bike*."

"I know, I just thought that maybe -"

"No, you *don't* know," El interrupted, letting go of him and getting off the seat. She had to put distance between them before his kind eyes sought her face, before his sure hands reached for her. She walked a few steps, shaking her head. "You don't know *anything*," she added. Her voice was low, almost menacing.

She heard him set the bike on the ground and she hunched her shoulders up, willing him not to come to where she was standing.

He had every right to be upset with her, but when he spoke his voice was as gentle as ever. "I understand, El. When we all thought Will was dead, it was like -"

"No!" she shouted, her anger spilling out in a rush. Though it went against her instincts, she turned to face him. The poison thoughts that had been pooling in her mind for weeks had to come out. She couldn't stand it anymore.

"It's not like that. Will is a friend. Hop was - he's my dad. It's not the same thing," she continued, swallowing hard to keep her voice from breaking. Mike looked like he was about to say something but she barreled on, her voice rising again. "I looked for Will. I knew he was alive, and I told you. I took the hurt away. And now I can't - I can't look for Hop, and I don't even know if he's -"

She couldn't bring herself to utter the word that everyone had been avoiding saying around her. *Dead*. It was too final, and she wouldn't believe it, not *ever*, until she could go into the void and look for him herself. If she really couldn't find him, then she'd know, but right now she was trapped in a horrible limbo — helpless, stagnant — with no opportunity for *closure*; the word Joyce had talked to her about. The one that wouldn't take the hurt away, but would make it easier to bear.

There was a desperate look in Mike's eyes as he studied her. His hands were shoved into his pockets and he rocked back and forth on his feet, a nervous habit she'd become familiar with. Somewhere deep down El longed for him to reach for her, and it broke her heart that he seemed too afraid to try.

"El... I - you're right, it's not the same. I wasn't trying to say it was, I just - you're not alone in this. We've all been through - we want to help, *I* want to help, but -"

He stopped, and she knew it was because she'd started to cry, something in his words causing her anger to collapse. It all came rushing at her then; the dark thoughts, the ones she let out and the ones she'd been keeping in; the reality of what had been lost; the enduring, unbearable unknown. Her breath suddenly became too shallow and she gasped, her knees buckling before she landed hard in the dirt.

If the anger was a foreign feeling, this one was familiar — complete and total panic, a sinking wave of despair that brought her flashes of the worst nightmares she'd lived through: being locked in a dark cell in the lab; Billy in the void, telling her he was coming for everyone she loved; being alone in the woods, waiting for someone to come for her.

Between her sobs and strangled attempts to breathe, any outside sounds were dulled, her surroundings an indistinguishable blur. She became vaguely aware of Mike's body moving down next to her, his hand rubbing her back, his fingers tucking her hair behind her ear. "Breathe, it's okay, just breathe," he murmured, his voice a soft hum somewhere in the light.

He kept repeating the words, creating a mantra that slowly brought her back to the ground beneath her. A deep exhaustion set into her bones as her heart rate slowed, and the weight of it caused her to shift over into Mike's side. He wrapped his arms around her in the way that always made her feel safe — the superpower only he had.

"It's not fair," she choked out after a while, her sobbing now reduced to a steady cry. She clutched Mike's arm, squeezing it as if to emphasize her words. "It's just not fair."

He didn't say that he knew, or that of course it wasn't fair, or that he was sorry. He didn't say anything for a long time. Instead, he kept a soothing hand on El's back, kissing the top of her head periodically as she cried, willing all of the anger out with her tears. He listened when she told him all of the bad thoughts that had been sitting tight in her throat, threatening to choke her. He held her, never loosening his grip.

Later, when she said she was sorry, he shook his head and kissed her.

The Supercomm's static crackled for a split second before Mike picked up.

"El?"

Despite the state she was in, she smiled — she knew he'd pick up right away. She told him earlier that Joyce was taking her to the cabin to get some of Hop's things, and she was scared of how being there would feel. They'd learned about the move a few days earlier, prompting a seemingly endless stream of tearful conversations, late nights talking over the Supercomm until one of them eventually fell asleep.

It was pretty late then, making her that much more grateful that Mike had answered, had waited for her call like he promised. "Did I wake you up?" she asked.

"No," he replied. "I haven't fallen asleep yet."

"Me neither."

There was a pause. Even though their silence was never awkward, lately it had come to mean something that El couldn't always find the strength to say: *I need you*. It was that way tonight; she was so tired, spent in every possible way, but sleep wouldn't come. Like all of the other lowest times in her life, Mike was the only solace.

"Can you stay awake until I get there?"

El smiled even wider, holding the Supercomm close to her chest.

"Yes."

She hadn't moved from her spot on the floor when she finally heard the sound of him ambling through the Byers' guest bedroom window. He'd snuck in a few times before, and without the help of El's powers for stealth, they learned to be extra careful; she left the window halfway open and Mike would hoist himself up, sliding in as quietly as possible.

Usually she hurried right to him, but this time she found herself unable to do so, rooted in place. But she wasn't worried; like always, Mike would understand. She watched as he righted himself, scanning the room and frowning when he saw her, curled up on the floor next to a dresser opposite the bed.

"El?" he whispered, tiptoeing over to her. He lowered himself down across from her, sitting cross-legged and reaching for her hand. "What are you doing down here?"

El sat up a little, but before she could respond she saw Mike take in the objects next to her; the bandana folded into a makeshift blindfold, the small pink radio resting on its side.

"Were you..." he began, cautiously meeting her eyes.

She nodded. "Looking for him."

By that point, Mike had learned to hold space for her; to wait for her to breathe, to gauge whether silence, or reassuring words, or simply holding her would be the best response. He tried silence then, and it was the right thing. El sighed, lifting herself up all the way so she mirrored him, cross-legged with her back resting against the wall.

"I found these in my old room today," she explained, motioning to the bandana and the radio. "But I'm... it's still not working."

Mike placed a hand on her knee. "Hey," he said, dipping his head down a little, causing her to look up into his eyes. "It'll work one day - we'll get answers. I promise."

El nodded, feeling calm for the first time that day — for the first time in so long, really.

"How long have you been trying?"

She shrugged. "A few hours, maybe."

Mike inhaled sharply, his eyes darkening with concern. "Come here," he said, using both hands to pull her toward him. She shifted so that her back rested against his chest, and he tucked his chin onto her shoulder, wrapping his arms around her protectively. They sat like that for a while, El's eyes drifting shut, the potential for sleep real for the first time that night.

"Do you want to talk about it? Being at the cabin today?" he asked. El sighed, and she felt him tense behind her, worried. "We don't have to," he added quickly.

"It's okay," she replied. "I want to, I just... I don't know, it's hard to say what it felt like."

Mike waited as she searched for the words. She thought back to the drive there, how Joyce had squeezed her hand and told her she didn't have to go in if she didn't want to. But she *had* wanted to: without her powers, that place was all of Hop that she had access to. It wasn't like it was foreign, either, or scary — even all those months when she felt trapped there, it was still one of the few places she knew to be

home. She wanted to know that that feeling still existed.

The thing is, it did. And that *hurt*. It hurt that a place could still feel like home, without the person that made it so. How could that be? How could his boots still be by the door, a half empty carton of cigarettes open on the table, but there be no sign of him? All of the things she and Joyce took from there were just that: things. The comfort they brought was microscopic, temporary. She wanted her dad back.

"It felt... empty, but full at the same time. Full of him, even though he wasn't there," she told Mike after a while. "I thought going there would make him feel closer, but now it's like -" her voice hitched with a sob, and she took a deep breath. "It's like he's even farther away."

Mike pulled her in tighter, pressing a soft kiss to her temple. "I'm sorry, El," he said gently.

She let herself cry a little, surprised that the tears came so easily — she'd been too exhausted earlier to muster up any. "It's okay," she told Mike. "I just - I just wish I could talk to him. Tell him about the move, and everything."

"What do you think he'd say?"

The question made her smile, recalling Hop's distinct, gruff voice. She cleared her throat, putting on her best impression of him: "Change will be good for you, kid. But don't let Wheeler keep you up on the phone all night long."

They both laughed. "I'm sure he'd love to know that we've applied the '3-inch minimum' rule to your bedroom window now, instead of the door," Mike said.

That made El laugh harder, and he had to shush her a little as they both giggled. They forgot for a moment where they were, or why they were there; up in the middle of the night, unable to sleep in the face of all that was ahead.

"You know," Mike said when they finally stopped. "Even without your

powers, you can always talk to him. Maybe... maybe it'll help."

El tilted her head back so she could look at him: this boy who'd learned what to say, even in the face of this immense grief, the awful nights and days where it consumed her. This boy she loved, though he didn't know that yet — she had a moment in mind when she would finally tell him.

"Yeah," she replied. "Maybe I will."

The silence that followed beckoned sleep, and a few hours later when the sun spilled in through the window, El was the first to wake. She roused Mike and helped usher him out the window before anyone else in the house got up. It was, as it had come to be over the past few days, rushed kisses, frantic promises that they'd see each other in a few hours. When he was gone, El picked up the bandana and the radio, clutching them both to her chest as she curled up on top of her sheets, too tired to tuck herself in.

She thought about trying one more time, to see if her powers had miraculously come back. She thought about the cabin, Hop's Hawkins P.D. shirt tossed over the back of the couch. She thought about what Mike said about talking to him, and even though it made her eyes cloud with tears again she tried, quietly in her own head. She wondered if he could hear her, wherever he was:

I miss you. I'll find you soon. I promise.

A/N - I know the fandom is a little quieter right now, but I appreciate reviews more than you know, so please leave one if you'd like! Thanks for reading, as always.